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ABSTRACT

This digest is drawn from "Understanding the Impact of Reverse Transfer Students on Community Colleges," a "New Directions for Community Colleges" volume. Reverse transfer student characteristics, reasons for non-traditional transfer patterns, and implications for community colleges are discussed. Reverse transfers are students who enroll in two-year institutions after earning credits from a four-year institution. These include both undergraduate reverse transfer students (URTSS) and post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students (PRTSS). URTSS are often drawn to community colleges because of smaller class size, convenient location, lower fees, flexibility in course offerings, or academic complications experienced at a four-year institution. PRTSS tend to enroll in community college courses for development of professional skills, completion of certificates, or personal growth. Reverse transfer students positively affect community colleges by increasing enrollments, redefining the traditional community college role in higher education, and bringing a higher level of maturity and experience into the classroom. They may also add challenges to the classroom by dominating discussions and possibly, by detracting from the experience of other students. Reverse transfers have expanded the role of community colleges into continuing and graduate education. Some colleges have successfully developed programs catering to reverse transfers. It would be to the advantage of community colleges to better understand this growing student population and develop programs to assist the reverse transfer student's education. (RDG)

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Reverse Transfers in the Community College

by Christine LeBard

Two-year colleges traditionally serve as initial points of entry into college for first-time students to earn credits, certificates, diplomas, and associate's degrees. These colleges also act as feeder institutions for students interested in transferring to four-year institutions to earn the baccalaureate. While individuals who follow traditional transfer patterns still represent the majority of student movement between two-year and four-year institutions, a growing proportion of the transfer flow consists of students following more complex enrollment patterns. Unlike traditional students, reverse transfer students attend four-year institutions prior to enrolling in community colleges (LeBard, 1999). This Digest focuses on reverse transfers, reasons for complex transfer patterns, the effects of reverse transfers on community colleges, and implications for community colleges.

Definitions

Reverse transfers are students who enroll in two-year institutions after earning credits from a four-year institution. Two sub-groups are used to differentiate transfer patterns: undergraduate reverse transfer students (URTSs) and post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students (PRTSs). URTSs are students who transfer from a four-year to a two-year institution before earning the baccalaureate, while PRTSs are students who have earned at least the baccalaureate before attending to a two-year institution (Townsend and Dever, 1999; Quinley & Quinley, 1999).

The term "reverse transfers" may be a misnomer because it assumes that four-year institutions are the pinnacle of higher education. Designating students who follow multiple transfer patterns with terms such as "reverse" implies that these students are regressing. Such terminology belies the fact that nearly 15 percent of all college students who

follow multiple transfer patterns successfully attain the baccalaureate before transferring (Bach et al., 1999).

Reasons to Attend Community Colleges

URTSs are students who have earned college credits but not a baccalaureate from a four-year institution before enrolling in the community college. Although some URTSs transfer to the community college as a result of academic complications experienced at a four-year institution, many cite other reasons for their transfer patterns. Some students experience financial difficulties, and believe the lower fees and the campus proximity to their homes make the community college more affordable and convenient than the four-year institution (Townsend and Dever, 1999; Quinley & Quinley, 1999; Catanzaro, 1999; Bach et al., 1999). Many URTSs believe that community colleges offer a welcoming environment by providing smaller class sizes and more student-teacher interaction. In addition, others are pleased with the flexibility community colleges offer. Night classes allow students to hold jobs, and the availability of day-care services on many campuses enables parents to take courses (LeBard, 1999). Although URTSs return to the community college for various reasons, most express satisfaction with their decision to transfer, and believe the community college serves their needs in ways the four-year institution does not (Townsend and Dever, 1999; Quinley & Quinley, 1999).

In addition, PRTSs, who have the baccalaureate, express satisfaction with attending a community college, but for different reasons from those expressed by URTSs. Many PRTSs use the community college to advance their positions in the workforce. The

community college can provide training for new employees and retraining for senior employees who need to update skills in an ever-changing society (Catanzaro, 1999; Quinley & Quinley, 1999). For example, programs in computer technology enable individuals to be more marketable in the workplace, while nursing degrees offer continuing professional development (Townsend and Dever, 1999; Quinley & Quinley, 1999; Catanzaro, 1999). In addition to workforce development, the community college serves PRTSs by providing courses for personal development (Townsend and Dever, 1999; Quinley & Quinley, 1999; Catanzaro, 1999). Advancing job skills, earning specialized degrees and certificates, and taking courses for personal growth are all ways in which the PRTSs utilize community colleges.

The Effects of Reverse Transfers

The positive effects of reverse transfers on community colleges can be found among institutions and within specific classrooms. The growing numbers of reverse transfers help to maintain the prosperity of the community college by increasing enrollments. Further, reverse transfers have become an important source of revenue because funding for the community college typically depends in part on student enrollments (Hagedorn & Castro, 1999).

California's differential fee is a prime example of the impact of reverse transfers on community college enrollments. In the early 1990s, Governor Pete Wilson implemented a differential fee that raised community college fees from \$10 to \$50 per unit for PRTSs (Hagedorn & Castro, 1999). This fee increase negatively affected both students and institutions. Many PRTSs could no longer afford to attend the community college, and consequently dropped out (Hagedorn &

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Castro, 1999). This decline in enrollments demonstrates the need for community colleges to provide reverse transfers with open-access education at an affordable cost, or to face the risk of losing revenues from enrollment.

Reverse transfers expand the meaning of transfer, thereby influencing the community college's position in American higher education. As many reverse transfers already have attained degrees, or at least have attained junior status elsewhere, these students signify that the community college has become not only a point of entry into higher education, but also the apex in their educational careers. This new meaning for transfer creates an innovative role for community colleges, with a responsibility that includes post-graduate and specialized education (Hagedorn & Castro, 1999).

In terms of specific classroom activity, reverse transfers influence other students and instructors. Reverse transfers can become role models for students who are interested in transferring, and they often display maturity, dedication, and seriousness that can positively affect other students. Moreover, many instructors agree that reverse transfers tend to ask more questions and argue about relevant issues to a greater extent than do other students. Such interaction and discussion influence instructors to know the material, present it well, and be prepared to answer informed questions (Townsend & Lambert, 1999). The interaction between reverse transfers and instructors may likewise encourage other students to participate in classroom discussions. These positive effects accentuate the benefits of recruiting reverse transfers.

Alternatively, there are some controversial outcomes from the enrollment of reverse transfers. Specifically, "a second chance for PRTSs may come at the expense of a second chance for a major group of students served by the contemporary, public, two-year college: those people who did not do well in K-12 education and can only get jobs requiring a high school diploma or less (Townsend and Lambert, 1999, p. 75)." Several instructors suggest that inexperienced students tend to participate at lower rates because reverse transfers can dominate discussions. Instructors likewise may find it difficult to coordinate classes given the variety of knowledge and academic experiences

among the different types of students (Townsend & Lambert, 1999).

Implications for the Community College

Research on the impact of reverse transfers on the community college shows how these students have expanded the role of the community college. While the community college still can be considered the initial point of entry into higher education by facilitating transfer to the four-year institution, it also serves as the site for continuing education for URTSs and graduate education for PRTSs. This role transformation influences researchers and administrators to develop programs and courses that adequately serve both URTSs and PRTSs.

Some community colleges have successfully developed programs specifically for reverse transfers. The New Start Program, at Kingsborough Community College, serves URTSs by providing remedial courses and informing them about the different aspects of the four-year institution. Thus, many students are provided with a "new start" or a second chance for academic success. Chattanooga State Technical Community College provides programs that recruit PRTSs and enable them to obtain technical degrees in computer science, health fields, and engineering technology (Catanzaro, 1999). The benefits of such programs for URTSs and PRTSs suggest the need for increased program implementation and development nationwide.

Conclusion

Having educational needs that may be different from the traditional transfer student, reverse transfers are a growing population on community colleges. However, these students offer many positive benefits to the community colleges. Therefore, it would be to the advantage of many community colleges to continue to develop better ways for understanding the reverse transfers. With knowledgeable information on this special population, specific programs and policies can be determined to assist the reverse transfer student's education.

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